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County, Miami creating informational call center

By Vanessa Kruttschnitt

Miami-Dade County and the City of Miami are creating a joint non-emergency telephone information center for residents.

The call center is intended to provide all residents access to government departments through one three-digit number, 311.

An interlocal agreement between the county and the city was completed in July 2004, said Don Riedel, director of the Office of Miami Citistat, a tracking system that supervises progress in city departments. The agreement calls for the city to give up its dedicated use of the 311 number while the county becomes responsible for the call center's operational and maintenance costs.

A test of the database and operators was initiated Nov. 29, and the county added the city's service requests and informational topics to their business operations May 9, said Becky Glover, manager for the 311 center.

The info center, free to callers, is operational but will not be marketed until September. Through June 30, the call center, with 64 operators, was receiving about 3,400 calls daily.

Estimated cost to the county for the first year of the call center is \$3.3 million, said Loretta Cronk, assistant information officer.

"It's a win-win situation for residents," said Mr. Riedel. "Instead of creating two call centers, by merging together, it's much more efficient, and it saves money to taxpayers."

Ms. Glover said 92% of calls received are informational inquiries - including information on marriage licenses and passports. The remaining 8% are requests for services, she said - including those involving code-enforcement issues such as abandoned vehicles, illegal signs, illegal dumping, public works issues such as flooding or drain problems and potholes and solid-waste issues such as missed garbage pickups.

The center assists callers in three main ways, said Mr. Riedel - through an electronic work request, a phone transfer or referral to a Web site or an immediate answer from the operator.

In an electronic work request, a request for service is completed and the caller is given a tracking number. The electronic request is sent to the corresponding department, which is expected to attend to the problem.

"Calls today are received through the (305) 468-5900 line that has been established since 1996 for county information services - the Miami-Dade Answer Center," said Ms. Glover. "It is the same number that is used during countywide activations such as hurricanes, floods and other regional events."

The 311 center is operational 8 a.m.-8 p.m. weekdays and assistance is offered in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

The 311 system is used by several cities around the country such as Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Austin, Detroit and New

York. Ms. Glover said Miami-Dade and Miami representatives visited those cities to observe their operations.

According to the New York Department of Information Technology & Telecommunication, the city's 311 center receives about 1 million calls a month.

"We looked at the best of the best," Ms. Glover said - "what each city was doing, and we modeled the best practices after each one of those centers."